

Orlando Sentinel  
July 11, 2005

### **Support CAFTA**

*Our position: House should follow Senate in OKing trade pact with Latin countries.*

A free-trade agreement between the United States, five Central American countries and the Dominican Republic is a good deal all around. It would expand markets for exporters, encourage job-creating investments, lower prices for consumers and strengthen U.S. ties with Latin America.

The U.S. Senate had the good sense to vote in favor of CAFTA. Now the fate of this badly needed agreement rests with the U.S. House of Representatives.

It's encouraging that Florida's two senators, Democrat Bill Nelson and Republican Mel Martinez, voted for the agreement. It would be especially beneficial for Florida, because almost half the trade between the United States and the CAFTA countries moves through the state. History says a free-trade pact will boost that flow, adding to the more than 500,000 jobs already attributable to trade in Florida.

But it's discouraging that neither of Florida's senators was willing to commit his support to CAFTA before the Bush administration made concessions to protect the politically powerful sugar industry. The import limits and price supports that the administration left intact benefit Big Sugar at the expense of consumers.

CAFTA still faces an uphill battle in the House. Democrats who have voted for free trade in the past, but are balking now, could make or break the agreement. They need to rise above partisan politics, as such prominent Democrats as Jimmy Carter and Bob Graham have done in urging CAFTA's approval.

Special-interest groups lobbying against CAFTA have called the agreement "worse than NAFTA," the pact that created a free-trade zone encompassing Mexico, the United States and Canada. But that's a weak argument.

Those groups claim that NAFTA, which took effect in 1994, has cost Florida 27,631 jobs. Assuming their figures are correct, it's important to put them in perspective. In the past year alone, Florida added more than 225,000 jobs, according to the state Agency for Workforce Innovation. Metro Orlando alone gained 36,300 jobs during that period. Clearly, NAFTA hasn't wrecked the state economy.

Congress, while supporting CAFTA, should continue pushing the Bush administration to do more to help any workers who lose jobs to foreign competition. Retraining and other transitional assistance are in order. But looking only at job losses in industries that can't compete can make any trade agreement look bad. Job gains in other industries that thrive with the opening of new markets abroad also need to be considered.

In the first decade after NAFTA, U.S. exports to Canada and Mexico almost doubled from \$134 billion to \$251 billion, according to the U.S. Commerce Department. Manufacturing output and wages both rose during that period, and overall U.S. employment increased by almost 18 million jobs.

If House members consider all that America stands to gain from CAFTA, they'll readily support it.